

Myron Freeman: a pr cautionary example

BY [STEVE FENNESSY](#)

Myron Freeman is not a good public speaker. He has a stammer. In the media spotlight, he struggles to speak in complete sentences.

And yet, if you ask **Eric Seidel**, who earns his living making public figures comfortable with the press, all of those shortcomings don't mean Freeman can't be an effective Fulton County sheriff.

"People will forgive that," says Seidel, owner of The Media Trainers, a Marietta-based public relations firm. "If people feel you're being honest with them and you're in control and know what you're doing, that's all they need."

With Freeman, however, Seidel says, "you're just not getting that sense."

Seidel has a harsh grade for Freeman's performance in the wake of the March 11 killing spree that began in a courthouse the sheriff is sworn to protect.

Since then, Freeman, who'd been in office just 10 weeks before Brian Nichols allegedly opened fire, has avoided most interviews, choosing instead to address the media through his underlings.

What's more, he has insisted that deputies performed in an "exemplary" fashion the day a judge, courtroom reporter and one of their own were gunned down. And he has adopted the passive voice when accepting blame for the incident, acknowledging only that "mistakes were made."

Even the task force Freeman appointed to look at courthouse procedures after the March 11 incident has earned him criticism, stacked as it is with campaign donors, officials with no law enforcement experience, and even Atlanta's police chief, who's under fire for his own department's response to the courthouse rampage.

For what it's worth, Freeman at least seems to be aware of his public image problem. Not long after Brian Nichols was arrested for the courthouse killings, Freeman's office contacted Jeff Dickerson, a public relations consultant and former *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* journalist.

Dickerson says he met with Freeman or his staff about six to eight times, advising them on how to best deal with the media scrutiny. Dickerson says the relationship was informal; there was no contract between Dickerson and the sheriff's department, and he didn't bill the agency.

"This debacle was thrust upon him," Dickerson says of Freeman, who prior to running for sheriff had been second-in-command at the Georgia State Patrol and had never held public office before being sworn in earlier this year. "Nothing in his background prepared him for the public spotlight."

Dickerson says he advised the department on how to better respond to media inquiries and state Open Records requests. "My experience tells me the best response is an open response," Dickerson says. "I have never found evasion to be an effective tactic."

And yet today, more than a month after the incident, Freeman still ducks interview requests.

Dickerson says he is no longer consulting with the department, and he declines to assess Freeman's public performance.

"I can advise, but I'm not in a position to make any policy changes," Dickerson says.

Seidel says the formula for crisis management - namely, to be open - is an easy one. But companies and individuals often insist their way is better. According to Seidel, Freeman is going his own way at his own peril.

"He's trying to run for cover," Seidel says. "And he has no place to hide."

And things are only getting worse. On Monday, a group of Freeman's own deputies, speaking through an attorney on the courthouse steps, called for the sheriff to resign or face a petition drive to recall him. Steven Leibel, the attorney, said Freeman was "unfit to lead."

Leibel has been hired by a group of deputies who, fearing retribution for speaking out, aren't identifying themselves. Thus, Leibel stood alone during the Monday afternoon press conference. Nevertheless, he said he was representing a "large" group of deputies. He wouldn't specify a number.

In Fulton County, the unseating an office-holder such as Freeman is an uphill battle. Signatures from well over 100,000 registered voters would be needed.

Still, Leibel's announcement further indicates the degree to which Freeman is under siege as sheriff.

"The sheriff can't do the job," Leibel said. "He couldn't lead during the crisis and he can't lead now."